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THE REPORT OF THE U.S. SELECT COMMISSION ON IMMIGRATION AND REFUGEE POLICY: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

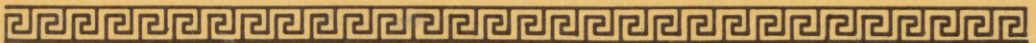
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IMMIGRATION, THE "NATIONAL INTEREST," AND PUBLIC POLICY

by Manuel García y Griego
El Colegio de México

International relations and immigration are two areas that one would think would have much in common, two areas in which one would naturally expect to find much room for constructive work in terms of public policy. But in practice, these two policy areas have very little in common, and very little can actually be done to integrate them from a practical standpoint of policy implementation. The report of the Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy stressed one particular theme with respect to this area, the "national interest perspective," an emphasis which is evident from the title of the report, "U.S. Immigration Policy and the National Interest." No report written or prepared by any of this century's several other commissions on immigration to the U.S. has focused on the effects of immigration on the national interest.

The Commission made clear how it interpreted the national interest with respect to immigration policy in a number of its published statements. For example, the opening chapter of its report states

The United States of America — no matter how powerful and idealistic — cannot by itself solve the problems of world migration. This nation must continue to have some limits on immigration. Our policy — while providing opportunity to a portion of the world's population — must be guided by the basic national interests of the people of the United States.¹

This quote reveals a number of fundamental assumptions behind the Commission's approach to international issues and immigration policy. The passage clearly implies that immigration might serve as a vehicle for solving the world's problems. This noble idea is new to me; I knew that policymakers conceived of foreign

1. *U.S. Immigration Policy and the National Interest*, pp. 2-3.

aid in that way, but I didn't realize that by admitting immigrants, the United States is doing the rest of the world a favor. According to this view, the sending countries gain in this process and the receiving countries lose; people who immigrate create problems for the receiving country, so accepting immigrants becomes a vehicle for solving the world's problems, elaborated in the report in terms of poverty, overpopulation, and so forth.

Another implication of the Commission's approach to immigration and international issues, a new theme in our domestic political environment, is that America has reached its limit in terms of admitting immigrants. In the currently popular context of "small is beautiful," one argument behind this view runs something like this: "We have scarce resources, and we are in trouble domestically in terms of solving our own problems. If we can't solve our own problems — unemployment, inflation, federal deficits, and so forth — how can we possibly attempt to solve other countries' problems by admitting a larger number of immigrants?" Another line of reasoning behind this particular view suggests that we have in the past been too kind-hearted in our policies for admitting immigrants, that perhaps it is time to be less generous with regard to immigration policy. A "dissent"² written by Senator Alan Simpson makes this point eloquently:

Compassion is a rich part of the American psyche and culture. I believe Americans feel it more deeply than any other people. Yet if elected and other governmental officials do not take care to control it in themselves and protect the national interest, not only will they fail in their primary official duty, but there is a very great risk that in the long run the American people will be adversely affected to a degree that they will be unable or unwilling to respond at all, even when the need for a hospitable America is desperate. I refer to this potential unwillingness to respond as "compassion fatigue." The signs are all around us that this is already developing.³

The central question that emerges from this perspective on immigration policy is whether a high level of immigration conflicts with the U.S. national interest. Of course, the answer to that question requires a definition of the term "national interest."

2. This opinion, like many of the so-called "dissents" written for the report, does not really disagree with the recommendations of the Commission but rather suggests that those recommendations do not go far enough or are not strong enough.

3. *U.S. Immigration Policy and the National Interest*, p. 409.

While I cannot hope to supply such a definition, I might point out that the Select Commission never defined the term, either. The Commission simply assumed that a conflict exists between the national interest on the one hand and admitting immigrants on the other. But during the last 200 years, millions of immigrants have been admitted to the U.S.; has immigration policy therefore functioned to subvert the national interest during the last two centuries? Would the national interest be served by expelling people, citizens perhaps, from this country? Such logic runs contrary to what economic historians have concluded from their studies of immigration during the 19th and early 20th centuries — that the European economies subsidized the U.S. economy through the mass migrations of this century and last. We might pose analogous questions about internal migration from the “Snowbelt” to the “Sunbelt”: has such population movement harmed the Sunbelt? We might begin to answer that question by noting that people continue to leave the Snowbelt for reasons that relate to hardships there and benefits in the Sunbelt — not the other way around. To avoid belaboring the point, I will simply conclude that posing immigration as inherently conflictual with the national interest of the United States is inconsistent with just about everything that we know about the economic, social, cultural and other effects of migration, both international and internal, in the history of the United States.

With respect to the international dimension of immigration, the recommendations of the Select Commission include ideas such as cooperating with sending countries to gather data regarding the effects of migration. The Commission's report also recommends revitalizing the existing international organizations that deal with immigrants and immigration, expanding bilateral consultations with source countries, and developing regional mechanisms to promote cooperation in related areas such as trade, investment, foreign aid, and economic development. The report proposes increased international cooperation and protection of foreign nationals within the boundaries of receiving countries on the one hand, and more vigorous enforcement — of U.S. immigration laws, of course — on the other. On the issue of refugees, the Commission proposed regional conventions on forced migration and the establishment of regional authorities to work with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees.

Basically, the content of these recommendations centers on the assertion that the United States as a receiving country should consult with sending nations — particularly its neighbors (meaning Mexico and the Caribbean countries) — to promote dialogue, communication, exchanges of information, and so forth. But beyond that assertion, the Commission's report contains very little. The reasons for that shortcoming deserve in-depth exploration which I cannot attempt in this short presentation; I would like to suggest, however, that the Commissioners could

not have recommended much more than they did because the policy space for international cooperation in migration issues is very limited. Policymakers conceive, address, and will continue to treat immigration as a domestic policy question which has international policy implications but which does not fit within the traditional framework of international negotiations and bilateral discussions.

In summary, the Select Commission's report indicates that with respect to their impacts, immigration issues should be handled by getting the cooperation of source countries to reduce migration pressures. But even after having taken this approach, the Commissioners did not make any substantive recommendations that policymakers might adopt in an effort to accomplish the stated goal. The reason for that failure, I would argue, is that the policy space for such actions is very limited, and the Commissioners recognized that constraint.